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A golden opportunity

Students get a unique experience at the U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials

By Eric A. Howald

More than 1,000 elite track and field athletes were gathering for the 2020 U.S. Olympic Team Trials at Hayward Field, just 90 miles south of Linfield's McMinnville campus, and Assistant Professor Natalie Welch wanted her students to do more than just watch the world-class competition.

"I went to the Olympic Trials during my time working at Nike and it was like the Super Bowl for track and field," she said. "I also know from my experience that they need a lot of volunteers to put on those type of events. When I found out the trials would be back in Eugene in 2020, I did my research online and reached out."

Thanks to that outreach, seven sport management students traveled to Eugene in June 2021 to volunteer as part of the event's "Go Team," a role which fills in for various understaffed positions.

"Having our students serve in this role really gave them a broad range of practical experience as ushers, promoters and runners, as well as working in the volunteer tent," Welch said. "They took turns serving as team captain, so it was a great combination of practical and leadership experience."

For the students, it was a unique opportunity to apply their classroom lessons in the field – literally.

"It was one of the best experiences outside of school," said Keaton Wood '21, a Lake Oswego native who is now pursuing his master's degree in business at Linfield. "I really got insight into a world that you normally only see on TV. I was able to apply things learned in the classroom to real-world situations and get real-world experience."

Wood, who competed in four NCAA Division III National Championships as part of the Linfield track and field team, spent some time at the trials working with NBC's production team as a spotter and some time on the hurdle crew.

As it turned out, the volunteer experience left him with a front-row seat to an unforgettable sports moment.

"When Ryan Crouser broke the world record in the shot put, I was sitting maybe 5 feet away," he recalled. "It's funny – I was going to buy tickets to go the trials, and I ended up getting a role to be in the best seat in the house."

It was an opportunity made possible by 31 donors to the School of Business as part of Linfield's One Wild Day campaign. The \$9,430 raised for the Business Dean's Fund on May 11-12, 2021, paid for housing in Eugene for the seven students, which meant they could volunteer for all 10 days of the trials.

"Without the giving day donations, we would not have been able to logistically work the trials," Welch said. "There wasn't quite enough time to make the commute back and forth to Eugene, and all of the housing options were very expensive."

The students' performance at the trials was noted by organizers, who invited Linfield to bring students back to Eugene in July 2022 to help with the World Athletics Championships.

"I received many compliments about the Linfield students throughout and post event," said Beth Garland, director of workforce and sport services for TrackTown USA, the event organizers. "They were dependable, engaged in the process, followed directions when needed and were self-starters. They were such a success we are looking for more ways to engage them earlier in the planning process and during our events."

And the feeling was mutual. Volunteering at the trials was an opportunity that Linfield's sport management students won't forget.

"The facility was amazing, and it was interesting to see the behind-the-scenes details of running such a large event," said Evan Bates '22, a sport management major from Montesano, Washington. "We got to meet and talk to world-class athletes and were right next to all the action. It was also a way for me to meet and form relationships with other Linfield students. I gained a lot of experience from this event."

ON TRACK FOR SUCCESS: Seven Linfield students had a good time connecting with others at the trials, including (from top, L-R) Evan Bates '22, Andrew Starkel '22, Katrina Johns '22 and Molly Danielson '19 with another volunteer.

